

# THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT – PREVALENCE AND ATTITUDINAL RESEARCH IN NORTH AMERICA



Global Initiative to  
**End All Corporal Punishment  
of Children**

Summaries prepared by the Global Initiative to End  
All Corporal Punishment of Children  
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## CANADA

A 2008 study in Canada with adolescents and their parents of Caribbean and of Filipino heritage found that 78% of the 118 Caribbean parents interviewed and 42% of the 136 Filipino parents interviewed thought that they should have the “right” to physically punish their children, while adolescents disagreed.

(Hassan, G. et al, 2008, “Caribbean and Filipino adolescents' and parents' perceptions of parental authority, physical punishment, and cultural values and their relation to migratory characteristics”, *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 171 - 186)

In a sample of mothers of preschoolers in Manitoba, 59% reported having used physical punishment in the previous two weeks.

(Ateah, C. & Durrant, J. E., 2005, “Maternal use of physical punishment in response to child misbehavior: Implications for child abuse prevention”, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29, pp.177-193)

A survey of 1,000 people in an SES/Sun Media poll in January 2004 found that 64% support the use of force such as spanking by parents to discipline a child, though a wide majority oppose physical force being used by others. Support for spanking as a reasonable measure was highest in the West at 71% and Ontario at 62%. The lowest support was Quebec at 47%. Only 7% supported criminal charges for parents who spank their children; 7% also said that children should be removed from homes where their parents used spanking as corporal punishment; 5% supported both these measures.

(“Spanking poll backs ruling”, *Winnipeg Sun*, Manitoba, 1 February 2004)

In a sample of mothers of preschoolers in Manitoba and Ontario, 70% reported having used physical punishment at some time; one-third of those who used it did so at least once per week.

(Durrant, J. E., Rose-Krasnor, L. & Broberg, A., 2003, “Maternal beliefs about physical punishment in Sweden and Canada”, *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 34, pp.586-604)

A national postal survey of households with children under the age of 6, completed by 1,643 parents (698 married mothers, 698 married fathers and 247 single mothers), was carried out in 1998-1999.

Overall, 51% of parents reported using physical punishment occasionally or more often (1% “frequent”, 39% “rarely”, 11% “sometimes”); 49% reported never using it. There was no difference between mothers and fathers in the use of corporal punishment, but single mothers were less likely to use it than married parents, and parents with low education were more likely to use it than those with high levels of education. It was more often used for children aged 1-5 years, but 40% of parents of infants under the age of one year reported using physical punishment on their babies.

(Oldershaw, L., 2002, *A national survey of parents of young children*, Toronto: Invest in Kids Foundation)

A 2002 survey found that 50% of parents reported that they or their spouse had “inflicted light corporal punishment, like a slap” on their children; 6% reported that they or their spouse had “inflicted painful corporal punishment”.

(Canadian Press and Leger Marketing, 2002, *Child Abuse Report*, Montreal, PQ: Canadian Press and Leger Marketing)

## **UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

In a survey in North Carolina which involved nearly 3,000 mothers of children aged 3-27 months, 30% of respondents said that they had spanked their child in the past year. Eleven per cent of those who had spanked their child in the past year had done so more than 20 times. Five per cent of mothers of 3 month olds said they had spanked them, and more than 70% of mothers of 23 month olds had done so. With every month of age, a child had 27% increased odds of being spanked.

(Zolotor, A. J. et al., 2011, “The emergence of spanking among a representative sample of children under 2 years of age in North Carolina”, *Frontiers in Child and Neurodevelopmental Psychiatry*, 2(36), 1-8)

A study found that fathers of children aged 1 year old with depression were more likely to spank their children. Over 1,700 fathers in cities in the USA were interviewed, of whom 7% had depression. 13% of non-depressed fathers and 41% of depressed fathers reported spanking their child in the past month, making depressed fathers nearly 4 times more likely to report spanking. The study authors noted that associations between maternal depression and spanking have been reported, and that the association may be directly related to symptoms of depression such as irritability and anger.

(Davis, R. N. et al, 2011, “Fathers' Depression Related to Positive and Negative Parenting Behaviors With 1-Year-Old Children”, *Pediatrics*, published online March 14 2011, [www.pediatrics.org](http://www.pediatrics.org))

A 2010 report on the Judge Rotenberg Center, a residential facility and school for children and adults with mental disabilities, found that severe corporal punishment was widespread. Punishments included electric shocks, long-term restraint, food deprivation and isolation.

(Ahern, L. and Rosenthal, E., 2010, *Torture not Treatment: Electric Shock and Long-Term Restraint in the United States on Children and Adults with Disabilities at the Judge Rotenberg Center*, Mental Disability Rights International)

65% of three year olds in a sample of nearly 2,000 families had been “spanked” by one or both parents in the previous month. The study examined the prevalence of corporal punishment and intimate partner aggression, with 49% of the families reporting both of these. In about 15% of these families, bilateral aggression or violence between the parents was combined with a single parent spanking the child.

(Taylor C.A., et al, 2010, "Use of spanking for 3-year-old children and associated intimate partner aggression or violence", *Pediatrics* 126: 415-424)

A large scale comparative study (World Studies of Abuse in the Family Environment (WorldSAFE)) which involved surveys with over 14,000 mothers of children aged under 18, carried out between 1998 and 2003, examined parental discipline in Brazil, Chile, Egypt, India, Philippines, and the United States. In the USA, 55% of children experienced "moderate" physical discipline (including being "spanked" on the buttocks, hit with an object, slapped on the face and having hot pepper put in their mouth). One per cent of children experienced harsh physical discipline (including being burnt, beaten up, kicked and smothered). More than a quarter of children (26%) experienced harsh psychological discipline such as being called names, being cursed and being threatened with abandonment. "Moderate" psychological discipline, including being yelled or screamed at or being refused food was experienced by 76% of children. Non-violent discipline, including explaining why a behaviour was wrong and telling a child to stop, was also widely used (experienced by 92% of children). The study found that rates of harsh physical discipline were dramatically higher in all communities than published rates of official physical abuse in any country, and that rates of physical punishment can vary widely among communities within the same country.

(Runyan, D. et al, 2010, "International Variations in Harsh Child Discipline", *Pediatrics*, published online 2 August 2010, [www.pediatrics.org](http://www.pediatrics.org))

A study of the relationship between gender and physical punishment in China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Philippines, Sweden, Thailand and the US, which used interviews with around 4,000 mothers, fathers and children aged 7-10, found that in the US 38% of girls and 36% of boys involved in the study had experienced "mild" corporal punishment (spanking, hitting, or slapping with a bare hand; hitting or slapping on the hand, arm, or leg; shaking; or hitting with an object), and 4% of girls and 5% of boys had experienced severe corporal punishment (hitting or slapping the child on the face, head, or ears) by someone in their household in the past month. Smaller percentages of parents believed it was necessary to use corporal punishment to bring up their child: for girls, 17% of mothers and 11% of fathers believed it was necessary; for boys, 13% of mothers and 16% of fathers believed it was necessary.

(Lansford, J. et al, 2010, "Corporal Punishment of Children in Nine Countries as a Function of Child Gender and Parent Gender", *International Journal of Pediatrics*)

A study which tracked corporal punishment of 3-11 year olds from 1975 to 2002 found that 18% fewer children were slapped or spanked by caregivers in 2002 compared to 1975. However, in 2002, 79% of preschool-aged children were spanked, and nearly half of children aged eight and nine were hit with an object such as a paddle or switch.

(Zolotor, A. J., Theodore, A. D., Runyan, D. K., Chang, J. J. and Laskey, A. L., 2010, "Corporal punishment and physical abuse: population-based trends for three-to-11-year-old children in the United States", *Child Abuse Review*, n/a. doi: 10.1002/car.1128, cited in "Spanking And Other Forms Of Corporal Punishment Of Children Are Still Common In The U.S. And Worldwide, Despite Bans In 24 Countries", *Medical News Today*, 10 August 2010, available at [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/197332.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/197332.php))

The CS Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health 2010 presented various scenarios to over 1,500 parents of 2-17 year olds and asked how likely they were to use different discipline strategies. A third said they were very likely to spank (hit with a hand) or paddle (hit with a wooden paddle) their child. More parents of young children said they were very likely to spank (30% of parents of 2-5 year olds, 24% of parents of 6 – 12 year olds and 13% of parents of 13-17 year olds), while slightly more parents of older children said they were very likely to paddle their child (8% for 2-5 year olds, 10% for 6-12 year olds, and 12% for 13-18 year olds).

(C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, *National Poll on Children's Health*, April 16 2010, Vol. 9 Issue 4, [www.med.umich.edu/mott/npch/pdf/041510report.pdf](http://www.med.umich.edu/mott/npch/pdf/041510report.pdf))

In 2009, a study by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Human Rights Watch looked at corporal punishment of disabled children in American schools. The report, based on data from 202 interviews with parents, students, teachers, administrators, and special education professionals, and statistics from the Office for Civil Rights at the US Department of Education, shows that disabled students experience a high rate of "paddling" (beating with a wooden paddle). Disabled students made up 18.8% of students who experienced this form of corporal punishment in schools in 2006-7, despite constituting only 13.7% of the total student population. In the states which use the most corporal punishment, students with disabilities were up to twice as likely as non-disabled students to experience this form of corporal punishment. In addition to paddling, students with disabilities were also spanked, slapped, pinched, dragged across the floor and thrown to the floor. Most instances of corporal punishment uncovered by the report were in response to minor infractions of the rules such as lateness. Students with disabilities were also punished for behaviours connected to their disabilities – for example, students with autism were punished for rocking, spinning and other behaviours which were a direct result of their condition.

(Human Rights Watch and American Civil Liberties Union, 2009, *Impairing Education: Corporal Punishment of Students with Disabilities in US Public Schools*, [www.hrw.org/node/84950](http://www.hrw.org/node/84950))

In 2009, the US Government Accountability Office reviewed legislation on restraint and disciplinary techniques used in public and private schools and examined student death and abuse from these methods over the last 20 years. It discovered hundreds of allegations of death and abuse, nearly all of which involved children with disabilities. In several cases in which these techniques were proven to result in death or serious injury, the staff involved continued to be employed as educators.

(United States Government Accountability Office, 2009, *Seclusions and Restraints: Selected cases of death and abuse at public and private schools and treatment centers*, [www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-719T](http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-719T))

A joint report by Human Rights Watch and the American Civil Liberties Union published in August 2008 highlighted the extent of corporal punishment of children in schools. 181 interviews were carried out with parents, teachers, students and administrators, including interviews with 34 young people aged under 18 and 37 former students aged 18 – 26. The report states that, according to the Office for Civil Rights at the US Department of Education, more than 200,000 students were punished at least once in the 2006-2007 school year and notes that actual totals may well be higher. African-American students and disabled students were punished more frequently than others. The interviews focussed on Mississippi and Texas, where corporal punishment is widely used. They found that corporal punishment is used in response to a wide range of behaviours, including minor misdemeanors such as

drinking in class and dress code violations. Corporal punishment usually takes the form of ‘paddling,’ or hitting a student on the buttocks and upper thighs with a wooden paddle. In several cases, this had caused serious injury.

(Human Rights Watch and American Civil Liberties Union, 2008, *A Violent Education: Corporal Punishment of Children in US Schools*, [www.hrw.org/reports/2008/us0808](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/us0808))

Federal statistics show that during the 2002-3 school year, more than 300,000 American schoolchildren were disciplined with corporal punishment, usually one or more blows with a thick wooden paddle. Sometimes holes were cut in the paddle to make the beating more painful. Of those students, 70% were in five Southern states: Texas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama and Arkansas.

(Reported in *New York Times*, 30 September 2006)

A telephone interview survey of 600 adults in each of the 50 states, carried out by SurveyUSA of Verona NJ in August 2005, found that overall almost three out of four (72%) supported the use of spanking as a disciplinary method (ranging from 55% in Vermont to 87% in Alabama), with almost one in four (23%) believing it acceptable for a teacher to spank a child (ranging from 8% in New Hampshire to 53% in Arkansas and Mississippi). Nearly one third (31%) believed it is acceptable to wash out a child’s mouth with soap (from 23% in Hawaii, Maryland and Massachusetts to 46% in Idaho).

(SurveyUSA, Verona NJ, August 2005, *Disciplining a Child 08/24/05*, [www.surveyusa.com/50StateDisciplineChild0805SortedbyTeacher.htm](http://www.surveyusa.com/50StateDisciplineChild0805SortedbyTeacher.htm))

A report on foster homes and residential facilities in Texas documented several incidents of severe corporal punishment, including children being punched in the stomach, pushed down the stairs, thrown against walls, kicked and isolated.

(Strayhorn, C.K., 2004, *Forgotten Children: A Special Report on the Texas Foster Care System*)

An ABC News telephone poll of a random national sample of 1,015 adults in 2002 found that overall 65% approved of spanking children, with 31% disapproving; 72% thought that teachers should not be permitted to spank children in school.

(ABC News poll conducted by telephone, 25-29 October 2002; fieldwork by International Communications Research of Media, Pennsylvania)